

Continuous Conversion (Mark 1. 29-39)

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This is one of the biblical passages most beloved of contemplative teachers and retreat leaders. Here Jesus gives clear warrant for taking time apart, ceasing action and withdrawing from the immediacy of the world's demands, seeking God in solitude and silence. 'In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed' (Mark 1. 25). For those who feel pressed and distracted by 'many things', overwhelmed by the needs of the world, here is permission to pause, to turn again to 'the one thing necessary' and be re-grounded in simple presence to God.

For me, it's an important and timely reminder. A reminder that no matter how much there is to do – how many good deeds could be done – our action must always be balanced by and sourced in periods of contemplation. For if we're to live truly and compassionately in the long term, doing must yield at times to being, speaking to listening, deciding to discerning. Only then will we be capable of recognising what is truly ours to do, and of bearing God's redeeming goodness in the world. Contemplation, then, is not just having a well-earned rest, taking a breather or recharging our batteries. It's about clarifying our knowing and deepening our awareness, thereby expanding the possibilities of our words and deeds.

In Mark's gospel, this expansion in possibilities of being is called 'metanoia'. The word comes from the Greek *meta*, meaning 'change', 'above' or 'beyond', and *nous* meaning 'mind'. 'Metanoia' invites our opening to a new level of intelligence and imagination. It happens, not because we will it or try hard, but simply as we turn towards what philosopher Brent Cooper describes as 'the disclosure of a higher reality and a more relevant truth'¹, or what Jesus calls 'the kingdom of God'. This

¹ Brent Cooper, 'Manifesting Mass Metanoia: Doing Change in Trying Times' in *Metamodernity: Dispatches from a Time Between Worlds*, ed. Jonathan Rowson & Layman Pascal (London: Perspectiva Press, 2021), p.219.

‘turning’ is prayer. And it’s urgent. As Jesus puts it: ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent [*metanoiete* – turn] and believe in the good news’. Be deepened, expanded, liberated, made more real by encountering what’s really Real. And in the Christian vision, this is not a one-off occurrence, but an ever renewed imperative. St Benedict spoke of the human vocation to continuous conversion, continuous transformation. And that’s what we’re about. We gather to respond to the ever-deepening invitation to turn and turn again, to be continually transformed by the renewing of our minds and the enlargement of our hearts.

Of course, there can be danger in this vision of life – especially in a world that prizes continuous quality improvement and economic growth. So I think it’s important to distinguish this gospel call to continuous conversion, from the deeply inculcated sense many of us battle with that we’re never good enough, we’ve never done enough, we haven’t made it and must try harder to be pleasing to God or adequate in the world. Because I don’t think Jesus’ call to continuing conversion is supposed to inculcate a neurotic sense of inadequacy, as if we have to achieve something or get somewhere we’re not. Rather it’s about realising, liberating and returning what’s already given. ‘The kingdom of God is come near’.

Thomas Merton beautifully expressed what’s at stake here towards the end of his life. He said: ‘We were indoctrinated so much into means and ends, that we don’t realize that there is a different dimension in the life of prayer. In technology you have this horizontal progress, where you must start at one point and move to another and then another. But that is not the way to build a life of prayer. In prayer we discover what we already have. You start where you are and you deepen what you already have, and you realize that you are already there. We already have everything, but we don’t know it and we don’t experience it. Everything has been given to us in Christ. All we need is to experience what we already possess’.²

² From ‘Recollections of Thomas Merton’s Last Days in the West’ by Br. David Steindl-Rast, OSB, <https://grateful.org/resource/recollections-of-thomas-mertons-last-days-in-the-west/>

Yet it does seem there's a kind of paradox here. Merton and the whole contemplative tradition attest to the fact that we're always, already loved and wanted and meant to be, and that God is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. The invitation is to know this and come to live from this assurance and peace, to enjoy the gift of being we've received, even in the midst of suffering and tragedy. But how? How do we realise this – not just as a theory, but as a lived experience? This is the paradox. For though Merton says we are already here, there is a sense in which realising it does require most of us to be changed. There are habits of mind that block the flow of life in and through us, that damage us and others. All of us have things to give up or let go, to resolve or heal, to tell the truth about and acknowledge.

The more we encounter what's really Real, the more that in us which is unreal is illuminated and uprooted. And although we experience this process, at times, as sheer relief and release, there are also times it feels profoundly disorienting, confronting and painful, or simply boring, dry and unsatisfying. Thus *metanoia*. Getting up, while it is still dark, going to a deserted place and praying there.

And I wonder what this suggests to you? What you sense is the invitation of continuing conversion to you at this time in your life? How are you feeling drawn? Where are invitations to deepening truthfulness or compassion for yourself, with others? Is something stirring, daring you to own more fully what is yours to do and be in the face of competing claims on your attention – as Jesus dared to own his primary calling in the face of the clamour of many who wanted him for other things? What knowing, what intelligence, what discernment arises in you, as you listen with the ear of your heart?

It seems to me that attending to these questions isn't just about our own lives and meaning. Our personal call to deepening conversion occurs at a time where there's also need for a profound collective transformation of intelligence and imagination. English philosopher Jonathan Rowson speaks of this moment in history

as a time for grappling with the ‘spiritual and material exhaustion’ of our age,³ where many things we’ve taken for granted seem to be dying or collapsing, where former ways of perceiving and being are inadequate to the truth of things, and new ways of perceiving and being are struggling to emerge.

We may find it difficult to see how our own personal *metanoia* participates in or enables a larger shift in consciousness. But Rowson suggests that part of what’s missing in our capacity to collaborate effectively for the greater good is precisely a sufficient number of people who have been willing to develop their ‘individual capacities and sensibilities’ so as to be capable of ‘resolute, discerning’ and skilful action. The common humanity required to be mobilised for love of the world isn’t ‘eight billion or so pieces of generic collaborative fodder’, he says, but a community of persons willing to be responsible for their place and part in the whole.⁴

This, it seems to me, is the heart of what a community like ours is about. It’s the heart of Jesus’ call to his disciples to turn with their whole heart to God, to listen deeply and act faithfully in response, so that God’s gifts might be truly released for the good of all. Everything we do together – our prayer, our celebration, our times for reflection, conversation and shared action – everything is in service of *metanoia*, continuous conversion, becoming ever more true and real, for love of the world. It is wonderful to gather with many of you in person again, as well as with our online community. Let us each commit ourselves this year anew to turning to God, listening deeply, responding bravely, enabling growth in ourselves and each other, loving and serving the world.

³ Jonathan Rowson, ‘Preface – Metamodernism and the perception of context: The cultural between, the political after and the mystic beyond’ in *Metamodernity* p.xxiii.

⁴ Rowson, ‘Tasting the Pickle: Ten flavours of meta-crisis and the appetite for a new civilisation’ in *Metamodernity*, p.35.